

At Montauk Point, Albacore on the Feed Prove a Tasty Pursuit

By PETER KAMINSKY SEPT. 30, 2014 NYTIMES.COM



Paul Dixon, left, and Kerry Heffernan this month in the waters off Montauk. Cooler weather brings out bay anchovies, which in turn attract false albacore, long considered too oily and too gamy to eat. Credit John Taggart for the New York Times

Every year, the first faint hint of a cool snap kick-starts the migration of tiny bay anchovies by the billions out of the tidal creeks and back bays of the East Coast. Then, for a few weeks, the rolling sea turns into bloody mayhem as the little fish run into packs of hungry false albacore slashing through the schools of baitfish, lighting up the waves beneath Montauk Point with their glinting green flanks.

When they are on the feed moving through the balled-up and terrified bait, the sound is like the whooshing of a hundred scythes reaping through a field of grain. Add to that agitated bands of sea gulls hovering, diving and making a commotion as they jostle for the albies' leave-behinds, and you have got a natural riot.

For local anglers, the return of the false albacore is like the beginning of spring training. But where the baseball player gets to work his way into shape with pitching that is not yet in midsummer form, the albacore angler has to face the equivalent of a 95-mile-an-hour fastball, chin high and terrifyingly inside.



Dixon holding the fishing line as Heffernan reeled in an albacore. Credit John Taggart for the New York Times

On one of those bluebird days that September bestows as a late gift of summer, I made a beeline for the albies of the East End with my friend Kerry Heffernan, a Manhattan chef currently working on a project to introduce sustainable and less familiar wild fish to seafood menus.

I met Heffernan 20 years ago at a chefs' outing on Esopus Creek in the Catskills, where I gave a fly-casting clinic. Heffernan was a newbie at that time. Since then he has surpassed my fly rod skills, adding to his mastery of conventional tackle, spear-gun fishing, surfboarding and kayaking. In short, he is a man very much at home on, in and under the water.

Capt. Paul Dixon, the dean of East End fly fishing, had called a few days previously to report that the autumn albacore scrum was on. "They're raging," were his words, which, calibrating for fishing guide hyperbole, meant it was probably worth our driving out and taking a shot.

Heffernan and I met Dixon on a morning of gentle winds and six hours of falling tide ahead of us: ideal conditions. The chef came armed with knives and cutting boards. "We are going to eat some fresh caught sushi," he said, although it has long been held that albacore are inedible — too oily, too gamy.

Big swells rolled into the tide when we rounded the point, spraying plumes of white foam 15 feet in the air. The waves crested and crashed against the riprap beneath Montauk's ancient lighthouse. On the south side, the waters were calm except for knots of raucous gulls seeking to pick off baitfish pushed to the surface by albacore.

We edged up on a group of albies, their green sides flashing like chevrons on a military uniform. A fish ate my second cast. He sped off like a laser, setting my reel to humming as it spun furiously around the spindle.

Then Heffernan laid a long back cast into the sweet spot of the boil made by a feeding albacore. The fish took and soon we had another course for our meal. "I'm going to bleed them out immediately and then ice them down, like any other tuna," he said, "and then we'll see how they taste."

No sooner did the albies show than they disappeared, erupting again perhaps 50 yards farther west. That is what albies do, churning rapidly through a ball of baitfish and then submerging just as rapidly as the bait flees only to endure another attack as albies follow in hot pursuit. Dixon deftly executed the small-craft equivalent of tiptoeing up to them, but they sensed us and moved off. The captain revved and prepared to follow.

“Hang on a minute,” Heffernan said, in what would become his mantra of the day. He had taken up a light spinning rod, dropping a jig to the bottom. “I think I have something.” A minute later he brought a keeper sea bass over the gunwales. Then, 20 minutes later, as Dixon clicked into gear again, Heffernan instructed us to hold on one more time as he pulled up a plump porgy, a fish he feels should be held in higher esteem by diners.

“Love porgy crudo,” he said. “It’s my new obsession.”

As the tide ebbed, we returned to the Point, where we landed and released six albacore, Heffernan punctuating each catch by swapping out fly rod for spinning tackle and hooking something edible every time. Soon we had added another porgy and a bluefish to our larder.

At the bottom of the tide we broke for lunch. Heffernan requested a bit of protection from the swells so that he could slice fillets safely with his very sharp knives. Dixon obliged, taking up a position just off Caswell’s Point, the westernmost promontory of the Montauk headlands.

Heffernan filleted the fish quickly, trimming them down to their meaty loins and performing the exacting cutting techniques that Italians use for crudo and the Japanese for sushi. He tossed pieces of the less choice cuts into a marinade of lime juice, herbs and chilies for ceviche. He finished his prep by dressing the delicately sliced loins with nothing more than sea salt and herbs from his garden (Thai basil, tarragon, chives, lemon verbena and fresh fennel seeds).

With Montauk’s sandy cliffs and the picturesque lighthouse as a backdrop, we ate. The fish could not have been fresher or more delicious.

“Nobody I know has eaten albacore, so I always took it on faith that they were as lousy as people told me,” Heffernan said.

Having tasted living — or recently living — proof, we could not have disagreed more.

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